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The CIA Counterattacks

The head of the Central Intelligence Agency is finally answering critics with a strongly worded counter-attack.

It's about time.

William E. Colby told Congress Thursday that "these last two months have placed American intelligence in danger" and "raised the question whether . . . secret operations can be conducted by the United States."

Since Dec. 22 when news stories alleging "a massive, illegal, domestic intelligence operation" were printed, "hysteria" surrounds any news story mentioning CIA.

Colby may exaggerate. Not every news story and not every comment has been surrounded by "hysteria." This newspaper and others, together with some voices in Congress, have tried to keep the charges in perspective and to point out that emotional handling of this sensitive issue can only do harm to the best interests of the country.

Yet the CIA is at a disadvantage and will remain at a disadvantage in answering critics because secrecy is essential to its work. If the agency is to be torn apart by its inquisitors and forced to "tell all," its effectiveness can, and probably will, be destroyed.

Colby points to the concern that co-

operative intelligence services of other countries have expressed because of the fate of sensitive information they have given the CIA. The CIA's agents abroad are described as "deeply worried that their names might be revealed with resultant danger to their lives as well as their livelihoods."

These are legitimate concerns and Colby had the duty to express them forcefully.

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To some espionage experts abroad the intensity of the attack upon the CIA is little short of madness. One of these is Robert Conquest, a British authority on the Soviet Union.

In United States News and World Report, Conquest recently commented on the Soviet's KGB, whose operations "are on a far vaster scale than the CIA." Said Conquest:

"What the CIA investigation must seem like to the KGB I can't imagine. From its point of view, it must be absolute fantasy. It seems rather like that to most Europeans, too."

Whatever the offenses of the CIA — and the nature and extent of them has not been established — the work of the CIA must go on. We hope that the President, Colby and others who have the obligation to guard national security, will stress that point now and in the weeks ahead.

